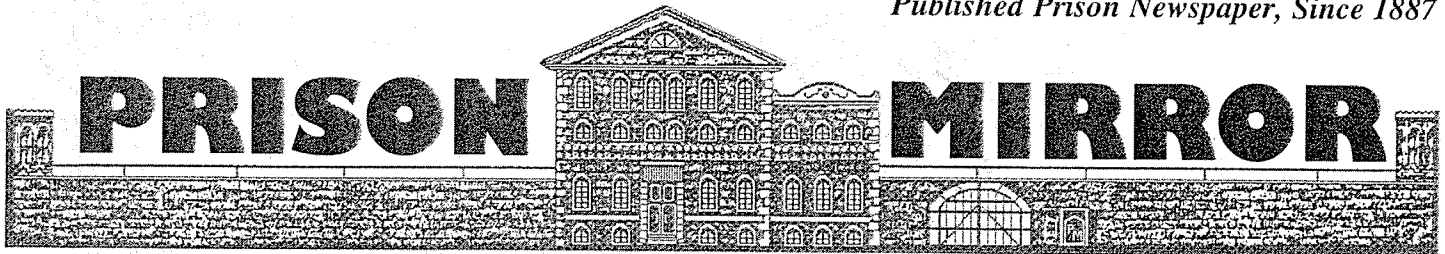


"It's Never Too Late To Mend"

The Nation's Oldest Continuously
Published Prison Newspaper, Since 1887



VOLUME 114 - NUMBER 10

MAY 2001

BAYPORT, MINNESOTA

A STITCH IN TIME

Over the past four and a half years a group of inmates at MCF-Stillwater have been hooking. No, it's not what you think. I'm referring to crocheting. The members of the Service Project/Relaxation Group have been weaving an intricate web of dutiful restitution, stress relief, camaraderie, and soul searching conversation that help put the pieces of their lives back together—with a scarf, hat, vest, or afghan to match.

By Carl Wesley

William DeVaughn's rendition of *Be Thankful For What You've Got* swirls around the circular construct of the prison chapel like a childhood lullaby. A guy could nod-out in here, like a dope fiend on a fresh high, if he's not careful. The relaxing atmosphere takes some getting used to, but the benefits are evident once you calm down and settle into the figurative easy chair of the group's warm embrace.

Being thankful for what they've got is apparent when you consider that the members are more than willing to sacrifice a half day of state pay to while away on Thursday afternoons with yarn, hooks, and each other. It all started in the fall of 1997. The prison population was on edge because a new DOC policy had taken away all tobacco products, and the stress levels soared. Monica Brower, Social

Work Specialist in the Psychology Department, had the idea that hands that had once held cigarettes should be busying themselves with something worthwhile. She understood that idle hands with creative potential could be put to use. Crocheting was her answer.

Ms. Brower scoured the master list of all those inmates who had a hobbycraft permit and solicited them to participate in the group. The criteria was that all items produced in the chapel area during the scheduled time allotted must be donated to the homeless. No exceptions. Lawrence Johnson was one of the first three men to respond. Lawrence had been crocheting for several years. Ms. Brower had solicited various church groups to donate yarn for their endeavor, and eventually Lawrence Johnson's family church also donated yarn.

(Continued on page 8)

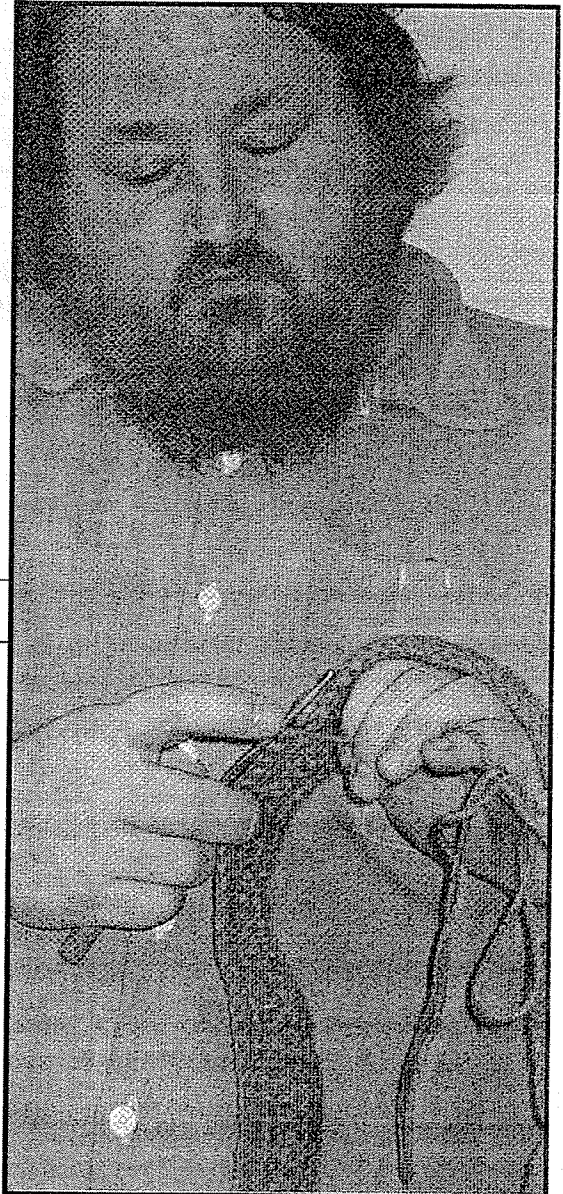


Photo of Lawrence Johnson by Carl Wesley

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR....	2-3	NEWSBRIEFS.....	5	COMMISSIONER'S VISIT.....	9
LEGAL PAGE.....	3	DIXIE DIXON.....	6-7	SPORTS.....	10-11
COMMENTARY.....	4	COVER STORY (cont.).....	8	MIRROR GALLERY.....	12

(Continued from page 1)

Initially it was difficult for me to see past the absurd vision of a homeless person wearing one of Lawrence Johnson's vibrantly-colored vests. It seems almost as absurd as a free civilian wearing one of the DOC's special bright-orange jumpsuits at high noon on a busy downtown sidewalk—you could spot 'em a mile away. A multi-colored knitted garment seems incongruous to what a person living on the streets would wear. However, on second thought, I can't imagine a better way to draw attention to the plight of our less fortunate citizens than to see them clothed in neon vests or hats as if to say; *Here I am, deal with me.*

DOC Commissioner Sheryl Ramstad Hvass likes the idea of inmates dealing with the community in terms of restoration. Giving back is one of the most impacting ways to set things right again. Her interest in community connections and service partnering was the impetus for her to sit-in on the group several months ago. With some of the members of the group serving life sentences, I was surprised to learn that most were oblivious to the Commissioner's presence. You'd think that they would seize the opportunity to gain out-date leverage by trying to curry favor with Ms. Hvass. This was not the case. In fact, many in the group had no clue that this was the DOC Commissioner in their presence. They simply aren't very astute in the matters of administrative personnel, or perhaps they just don't care. Either way, the power of crocheting to be the great equalizer was evident.

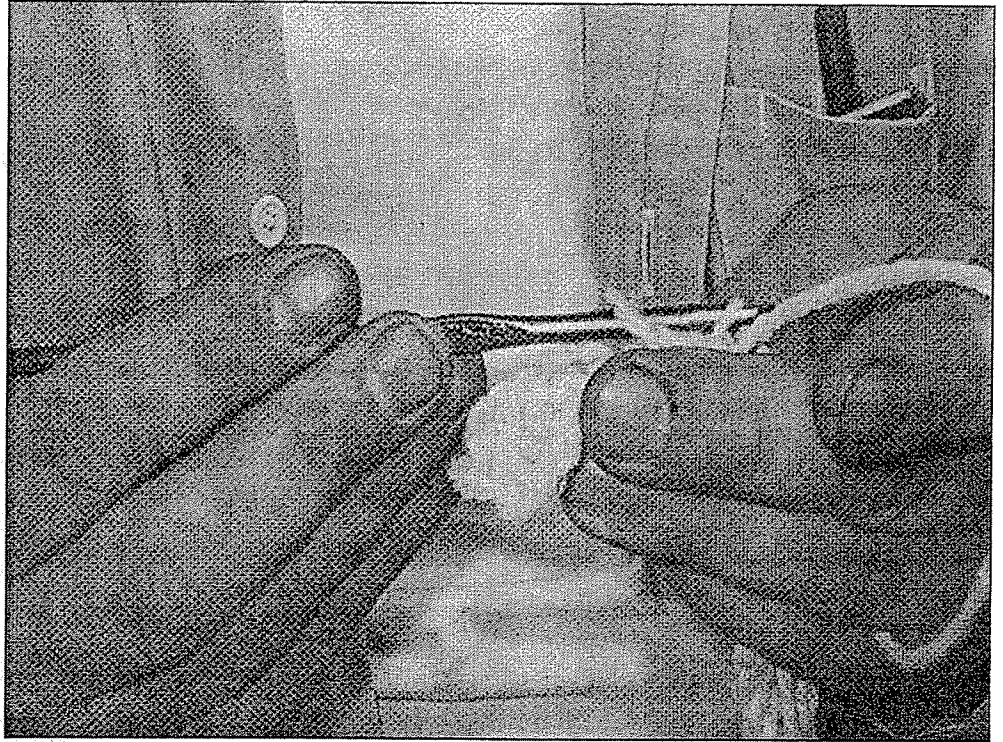
Crochet is a type of needlework that uses a hooked needle to pull a thread into interlocking looped stitches to form a fabric. People commonly use crochet to create baby clothes, sweaters, hats, mittens, purses, shawls, comforters, and afghans. Artists create flat and three-dimensional artworks in crochet.

People first crocheted with wool yarn, or fine cotton, silk, or linen thread. However, almost any fiber may be crocheted. Today, people crochet items made of light and heavy cotton, acrylic and wool yarns, and plain and metallic threads. Crocheting material may have a smooth, shiny, fleecy, or nubby texture. Different colors and threads may be combined for interesting surfaces. People may also work in beads, sequins, and baubles.

Crochet hook sizes are generally chosen to match the thread thickness. Thicker yarns need thicker hooks. The hooks may be made of metal, wood, plastic or bone.

There are many different crochet stitches. The basic chain stitch begins with a loop. A thread is drawn through the loop to form another loop. The first row builds up in this way until a length of stitches forms and becomes the fabric edge. The final fabric results by working loops into rows back and forth from the beginning edge row. The middle finger and thumb of one hand hold the thread so it can be picked up by the hook held in the other hand. Other stitches include the *single, double, slip, loop, bullion, picot*, and *cross treble*. These stitches are all variations of the chain procedure.

Crocheting is a popular hobby because the materials are usually inexpensive and the work proceeds quickly. Perhaps that's what makes it a hit



with the members of the group. As of April 19, inmates are no longer required to have a hobbycraft permit to participate in the group. For indigent inmates this is good news. It costs you nothing but your time and your participation.

The mechanics of crocheting are based on repetition which allows the artisan to engage his thoughts elsewhere. It was impossible for me to monitor each conversation in the room which spanned from reminiscing about childhood activities, to DOC policy, to the chow hall menu, to the Twins having their best April ever. All of this occurs over the classic melody of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* or other jazz and classical standards. It all serves as effective transportation of the mind.

I attended four sessions with the group to gain insight into their realm. On each occasion I was invited to pick up a hook and yarn and join in. Politely, I declined each time—telling the group that it was my job to weave words not yarn. Over the course of those four visits I became intrigued by the topics of discussion and the freedom with which the men spoke.

I was drawn into a debate about the "10-percent" issue and the yarn of opinion began to slowly unravel. One participant thought it not to concern him because he never receives monies from the outside. His rationale was that we are all in prison and it's part of the punishment for our particular crimes to endure whatever the DOC dishes out. That position set off a medley of reaction. Nearly everyone in the room disagreed. The concensus was that it was indeed a violation of our rights as human beings. Most in the group agree that we forfeit certain rights when coming to prison, but the right to being treated like a human being is not one of them. There was considerable discussion about those "little" things that we inmates embrace which many people out there take for granted. Things like hearing the pitter-patter of your small child's footsteps walking down the

hall towards your bedroom in the morning, or the sight of a full moon. You know, things we here in prison are deprived of.

I had debated earlier in the day whether this fourth and final visit was necessary in completing this article. I felt I wasn't in the mood to relax because I had too much work to do at *The Prison Mirror* office. However, when I left the group that afternoon I fully understood why the members participate. I enjoyed the most engaging three hours of conversation I had experienced in my nearly four years in prison thus far.

These men are onto something wonderful. They get to make small down-payments on the restoration to society with each afghan or sweater completed. And in the process, they explore their own humanity—seemingly with every stitch. The beauty of anonymous giving is that you don't get caught-up with whether you've received due credit or expected accolades. It's in knowing you did your duty as a humanitarian by enthusiastically giving back what has been given to you. Lawrence Johnson has dreams of one day running a nursing home/daycare facility in which the resident elderly would interact with the children, providing a foundation of love, guidance, and support through crocheting.

Although none of the 18 registered group members have actually seen their creations worn by the intended recipients, they rely on the faith that someone in need is benefitting from their efforts. We can never really know from where our blessings will come, but it is certain that when we have faith in the prospect of being blessed, we will surely recognize it when it happens. For these men, giving back is a most cherished blessing. The next time you see a person wearing a crocheted sweater or hat you may want to consider that it may be the product of an inmate at MCF-Stillwater with a desire to give back to society. When you think of that possibility you may realize that we are all indelibly connected by a single stitch in time.